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# What the everyday folk leave behind

Jack Mottram is fascinated by the rich pickings of Lotte Gertz

**A**T FIRST sight, the work of Lotte Gertz appears rather slight. The pieces on show at the Mary Mary gallery in Glasgow all share a washed-out look, with light grey backgrounds and a muted palette. There are torn edges, apparently apathetic marks made with pencils, crayons or oils, and various bits and bobs tentatively stuck to their surfaces.

Stand before one for a while, though, and it becomes clear that Gertz isn't an artist in the business of hastily dashing off vague abstracts, but a precise, thoughtful maker of images that take time to resolve. When they do, that first impression fades fast. The title of *Mr Sophistication (I Am Stage)* gives a hint, but look before you read and it slowly becomes clear that the rectangle missing a side is indeed a stage, and the flurry of curved lines above are the curtains that frame it.

Its neighbour offers a little more, with zig-zag marks in black wending their way across the paper to offer the barest suggestion of the pitched roofs of a row of houses. With that realisation, the six little marks on the right become a table, with a sewn-on button completing the picture of domesticity. And when Gertz edges over the line into outright representation she remains subtle, with clock faces reduced to a circle and two lines and interior space to a few angled lines.

This experience of looking, and looking again, sets up the viewer well: once a few connections are made, more come into view, and Gertz slowly but surely exposes her themes – and, perhaps more importantly, her method of making work.

The first clear signal of that method is Gertz's refusal to

restrict herself to a single medium. Every work on show combines collage, drawing, painting and printing, with a few tiptoeing towards the sculptural. Woodcut prints are sliced or torn and then put to use as a surface on which to draw or paint – or, in little slivers, applied in turn to a woodcut surface. Other elements are rendered with everyday objects. Matches, half-unravelling threads, off-cuts of leather and elastic bands are glued over drawings, and buttons are sewn on to paper.

These materials are not simply everyday detritus. Many have a common source – clothing – and most are items that we all lose easily or discard with little thought. Buttons pop off shirts and roll away, loose threads are picked at and flicked off, spent matches are dropped to the floor, red Post Office elastic bands can often be found in closes and on streets.

With these familiar objects, which must be lost in order for her to find them, Gertz is subtly evoking bodies moving through space and time, building a physical human presence out of the faintest possible traces. And, alongside these distinctly human materials, there are recurring motifs that reinforce the idea of a barely present body in transit: boxes and containers are everywhere (as, more obviously, are houses and theatres).

**By never stating her case, and working in whispers and hints, Gertz passes on her ideas**

To call this shadowy presence a character would be a step too far – you can't, after all, tell much about a person from a few bits of frayed nylon, the odd button and a hint of an unpacked box – but, as these materials are used again and again, Gertz creates the distinct impression that her works are inhabited by someone.

That someone might well be Gertz herself. Every one of the collage works on paper in this show bears very deliberate traces of the artist who made them. Some are subtle – those woodcut backgrounds are peppered with fingerprint smudges – while others are in plain sight and delivered with a nod and a wink, as in *Blue Box: Match Play, Match Spent*, in which the walls and roof of a house are built of crayons drawn with crayons.

**I**F THE missing figure is Gertz, her sources and references are almost absent too. The architectural forms only just represented in *Blue Box* or *Standard Houses: History, Her Story* have their roots in the houses of Gertz's native Denmark. More specific still, those clock faces are lifted from a single scene in *Casablanca*. The evocative title of *To The Roof! With a Couple of Things That Looked Like Wings* is a distorted quotation from a Brecht poem. Few viewers would catch these allusions, and it is clear that, just as Gertz makes a given piece using a process of revision – layering up elements from what might be called preparatory works, only to paint or draw over them – so she lights on a source, turning it over in her mind, discarding some elements and retaining others, until that first thought or image becomes something else entirely.

And it seems safe to say that these processes of thinking and making are not just similar but intertwined, with materials suggesting new thoughts, and references reconsidered, as the possibilities of a drawn line, painted smudge or applied object offer new directions. Much of this internal dialogue is, of course, private, known only to Gertz herself, but just enough leaks out to the viewer. The result is a curious mirroring, as gallery-goers seek to tease out the imagery and meaning in these works. Are, for example, the two hands of *Hands* and *Graphite Wheel* applauding the unseen performance implied in *Mr Sophistication (I Am Stage)*? Or, considering the intention behind the use of materials, do they reflect Gertz's mode of practice? These private, subjective works, when they are released into the public sphere of the gallery, become private and subjective once more in the minds of those who see them.

This is an indirect, subtle and almost teasing form of communication between artist and viewer, but a powerful one. By never stating her case, and working in whispers and hints, Gertz passes on her ideas with a sort of generosity. By abstaining from bald statements, she rewards those willing to put in the work required to uncover the ties that bind these pieces together. Gertz cares little, I suspect, whether her audience's specific thoughts match her own, satisfied that the gentle experience of discovery her work prompts in the viewer corresponds with the dialogue between ideas and materials at the heart of her practice.

*Lotte Gertz: Match Play, Match Spent is at Mary Mary in Glasgow until March 1.*